

Classical Ages

The classical age of a civilization is the time in which the most salient and enduring features of that civilization are established. It begins certain continuities that run through most of the civilization's history. The three classical ages we will look at in this Unit are those of India, China, and the Mediterranean.

India

One of the major migrations in human history was that of the Indo-Europeans in the second and third millennium B.C. Perhaps the most prominent of these migrations was the gradual descent of the Aryans, a group of Indo-European pastoral nomads, through the Hindu Kush mountains around 1500 B.C. As these people settled in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, they learned to use iron tools and began agriculture. Consequently, their population grew enabling them to press farther down the Indian subcontinent and soon they gave up the pastoral life completely and established permanent agricultural settlements. Although they never established a large centralized empire, their tribal organization gradually evolved into more formal regional kingdoms ruled by councils of elders.

Over a period of time, these Aryan migrants imposed their rule over the local Dravidian inhabitants of the subcontinent. Perhaps the most important step of this change was the formation of the Indian caste system. The sharp distinctions in this caste system were the result of the Aryans establishing a social system in which the indigenous people of India were subservient to them. The Aryans placed themselves in the upper castes as rulers over the inhabitants who were designated a lower place in the social structure. Gradually, four primary castes, or social classes, emerged in Indian society. In a land divided into numerous regions, the caste system served as the primary unifying force across the politically fragmented subcontinent. Indeed, most people came to identify themselves with their caste more so than with their city or region. Thus the caste system became a major characteristic of Indian culture across the ages.

Two important results of the caste system set India apart from other classical civilizations. Because people readily accepted their caste as a religious duty, there was a measure of toleration among the groups. Also, because the lower castes were regulated to agricultural work, there was practically no slavery in Classical India.

The early religion of the Aryans was found in a group of religious hymns and poems called the Vedas. Although they started as oral traditions that were memorized and passed on to subsequent generations, they were eventually written down. The Vedas tell the story of Purusha, a being who existed before the universe and was sacrificed by the gods. The parts of Purusha's body, from his mouth to his feet, became the features of the earth and, more importantly, the social castes. Thus religion sanctioned the social order. As this Vedic religion spread across the subcontinent, religion in India came to reinforce the existing caste system.

Like other agricultural societies, India's society was male dominated, or patriarchal. All public authority was made of up men. There were no women priests, warrior or tribal leaders. These gender distinctions were outlined in a book of religious mythology called the Laws of Manu. This book called on men to treat women with respect, but insisted that women be subject to their fathers and husbands. Women were promised by their fathers to husbands (betrothed) at very early ages, 8 or 9 years old, and then, as soon as puberty, married older men.

The classical age of India's history was comprised of two important dynasties, the Mauryan and the Gupta. The rise of the Mauryan dynasty was precipitated by the invasion of Alexander of Macedonia in 327 B.C. Although Alexander left no lasting impression on India, he did clear out several small states and create the power vacuum which allowed the Mauryan dynasty to emerge.

Under Mauryan rule much of the Indian subcontinent was united for the first time under one central government. They were able to rule such a large area by using a well organized bureaucracy. The most important ruler of the Mauryan dynasty was Ashoka. Under his rule the empire expanded and the bureaucracy became more organized. He created central organizations to ensure that his edicts and policies were carried out all across his empire. An important event during Ashoka's rule was his conversion to Buddhism. Although it remained a minority religion despite Ashoka's patronage, Buddhist missionaries, prompted by Ashoka, went out to Bactria, Sri Lanka and

other areas. This was one of the most significant early catalysts for the spread of Buddhism into central, east, and southeast Asia.

When Ashoka died the Mauryan empire soon crumbled. After a period of disorder and regional kingdoms, the Gupta dynasty emerged and once again united India under a common centralized rule. The Gupta empire never grew to the size of the Mauryan. The organization of their empire was considerably different as well. Ashoka used the bureaucracy to manage most details of the empire. The Guptas, on the other hand, let most decisions and policy making up to local leaders. They also preferred to negotiate or intermarry with local rulers to keep the peace. Although they ruled over a smaller area than the Mauryans, the Gupta era was the greatest period of political stability in classical India. However, this lack of centralized rule came with an eventual price. The various regions of India had their own distinctions and were never integrated into the whole as they were under Ashoka. In fact, the Gupta empire would break along these regional divisions as the empire was threatened by internal corruption and nomadic invaders. After the fall of the Gupta dynasty, the Indian subcontinent would remain fragmented into regions for over 1500 years. Thus the pattern of rule in classical India alternated between large but decentralized empires and networks of disjointed regional kingdoms.

Economy and Trade

Agricultural surpluses in India led to the emergence of towns, the growth of trade and industry, and changes in the caste system.

Towns grew across the Indian countryside and became manufacturing centers for iron tools, textiles, and pots, most of which were bought and sold locally. However, the conquests of Alexander the Great had created trading links between India and the Mediterranean, Persia, and Anatolia. In the east, the silk roads connected India to China. The primary Indian exports were cotton, pepper, pearls, and gems; they imported horses and bullion from the west and silk from the east. At sea, Indian trade depended on the rhythms of the weather. The monsoon winds blew from the southwest in the spring and summer, and the opposite direction in the fall and winter. As they grew to understand these patterns, Indians would time their departures for the short interval between monsoons. In this intermittent fashion, Indian merchants made trading contacts with Indonesia and southeast Asia. Many of these goods from Asia made their way through the Arabian Sea to the coastal regions of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Trade and economic growth created many new skilled craft laborers and merchants whose existence altered the Indian caste system. Individuals working in the same trade—such as textiles or metallurgy—often banded together to form guilds. These guilds did not fit easily into the existing caste system and in turn became subcastes, or *jati*. Soon the *jati* became the backbone of Indian society. They formed their own courts through which Indian society was regulated in the absence of a strong central government. Thus Indian families tended to associate closely with other families involved in the same occupations as themselves. This tendency has survived until the present.

The tremendous wealth generated by India's economic development placed pressures on the Indian social and religious system. As an agricultural society, India's priestly and aristocratic castes were granted special respect and reverence; their activities were necessary for successful harvests. The other castes did the labor and were given no respect. However, as trade increased, economic wealth and prosperity went mainly to the lower castes. The merchant caste grew very wealthy but still merited little respect while the priests, whose sacrifices were thought to guarantee bountiful harvests, did not seem as relevant as they did in the past. These social injustices were the catalyst for the rise of Buddhism and the reformation of Hinduism into a popular religion. (See notes on World Religions)